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## A GREAT NEW YORK JOURNALIST.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

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WE have had great New York journalists enough and to spare in the past, not to speak of the present, and it will not perhaps surprise the reader to realize that, in spite of their greatness, they were not New-Yorkers, though they were certainly journalists, leaving each a vivid and sometimes a profound impress on their time and place. Not to go so far back as James Watson Webb, there was James Gordon Bennett, who was Scotch, and his antithesis Horace Greeley, who was of the Scotch-Irish stock settled in Londonderry, New Hampshire. A little before either was William Cullen Bryant, the poet, from the Massachusetts hill-country, and much later there was Charles A. Dana, of New Hampshire and then of that transcendental air about Boston, crystallized for a shining hour in the community of Brook Farm. George William Curtis, who, though never the head of a powerful daily New York newspaper, was a great journalist in the highest sense, was again from New England, and again from Brook Farm. Henry J. Raymond was born on an up-State farm, and came to the metropolis the graduate of a small Vermont college. Edwin Lawrence Godkin, with whom the list must close, if we are not to deal with the great journalists who are still living, was of Irish birth and Irish and English breeding, and of a temperament equally representative of his mingled Irish and English descent. He was so far from being a New-Yorker in origin or in education that he was a fully mature Queen's College, Belfast, man, a student of law in Lincoln's Inn, and much experienced in journalistic life as a writer for the London press, and as the Crimean correspondent of the London "News," before he began journalist here in 1857, as a writer on the "New York Times."

It is not my purpose to rehearse, or even slightly sketch, the story of his life, which Mr. Rollo Ogden\* has told so well in parts, and in part has allowed to tell itself so well in the two volumes which have lately appeared. The work, always done with taste, with temperance, with sympathy by the author of the biography, has had efficient help from the subject, for nothing fell from Godkin's pen which was not characteristically forcible, characteristically transparent, characteristically pungent. His style always had atmosphere, and this atmosphere was always invigorating for most readers, even when it was irritating to some. It had savor, too, and was never so dilute with daily effusion as not to taste of a mind full of Celtic juices, cleared by English culture. The sort of man he was appeared in whatever he wrote, and his biographer is wisely sparing of the comment to which a less obvious and a less outright subject must have tempted him. Almost from the beginning, therefore, the great journalist tells his own story in the selection which the biographer judiciously makes from his correspondence, from letters alike open whether addressed to personal friends or impersonal readers. From the beginning they take hold on the imagination and invite it to realize the writer as he was in life and through life.

Naturally, the passages which embody his youth to us are the most attractive, though he did not change in quality, but only grew firmer and harder with advancing years. The young journalist, ardent for the cause of freedom to which he was constant at first in Ireland, then in the struggling peoples of the Continent, and then in the land of his ideal here, the land largely of his disillusion, but never wholly of his disappointment, has the charm of a fresh talent in those admirable letters to the London "News" from the seat of the Crimean War which made him known to the English world. They evince the power of observation and inference which he showed directly afterwards when he came to America and began the scrutiny of moral causes so soon to eventuate in a war far outreaching in consequence that of any war precipitated by European diplomacy. He had felt so strongly for the oppressed nationalities that he had come to the help of Hungary in a sketch of her history when that seemed

\* "Life and Letters of Edwin Lawrence Godkin." Edited by Rollo Ogden. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1907.

to have ended as a separate history; and when he began his travels through the Southern States in the later eighteen-fifties, he showed the same genuine, unsentimentalized feeling for the far more wretched and pitiable race which he found enslaved there. Every word of what he wrote concerning the semi-barbaric conditions in the South is of value. The rude aristocracy which romance has rehabilitated in the likeness of a splendid patriariate since the war destroyed slavery, he lets us see as it really was, bragging, bullying, drinking, shooting, spitting, and yet possessed of a political force and a native intellectual vigor, as well as a dauntless courage and a military genius, which made it one of the most interesting anomalies of history. He shows us the poor whites in their squalor and the black slaves in their misery, and he strips from the civilization founded on the subjection of both the glamour of its pseudo-hospitality and pseudo-chivalry. The most poignant passages of his Southern letters are those which shed their clear light upon the constant necessity that slavery had of blighting fresh regions; and hardly anywhere else is there such a realistic picture of the incident suffering as he paints of a planter's family making its way from the older to the newer country, and of the hopeless slaves who must bear the heaviest burden of the pilgrimage without a ray of light in the horizons before them, and with no incentive but the lash. Of his transit of a Mississippi swamp he writes:

"I fell in with an emigrant party on their way to Texas. Their mules had sunk in the mud . . . the wagons were already embedded as far as the axles. The women of the party, lightly clad in cotton, had walked for miles, knee-deep in water, through the brake, exposed to the pitiless pelting of the storm, and were now crouching, forlorn and woe-begone, under the shelter of a tree. . . . The men were making feeble attempts to light a fire. . . . 'Colonel,' said one of them as I rode past, 'this is the gate of hell, ain't it?' . . . The hardships the negroes go through who are attached to these emigrant parties baffle description. . . . They trudge on foot all day through mud and thicket without rest or respite. . . . Thousands of miles are traversed by these weary wayfarers without their knowing or caring why, urged on by the whip and in the full assurance that no change of place can bring any change to them. . . . Hard work, coarse food, merciless floggings, are all that await them, and all they can look to. I have never passed them,—staggering along in the rear of the wagons at the close of a long day's march, the weakest furthest in the rear, the strongest already utterly spent, without wondering how Christendom, which eight centuries ago

rose in arms for a sentiment, can look so calmly on at so foul and monstrous a wrong as this American slavery."

He bore faithful witness against the essential atrocity of the system which the South would have destroyed the Union to perpetuate; yet his study of the South was as wholly without prejudice as it remained without rancor. When the war had ended all that, and the tragi-comedy of reconstruction began, the South had no juster friend in the North than he who had seen it with such unsparing eyes.

On coming back to New York at the end of his travels in 1857, he prepared himself for admission to the bar, but he continued his correspondence for the London "News," and he slowly but inevitably began to identify himself with the journalism of the city where he had cast his lot. He was at all times much more able to do justice to alien temperaments and personalities than people who knew him only in the long fight he waged with civic abuses, and witnessed his unsparing use of ridicule, sarcasm and invective with his opponents, could well imagine. He, for instance, early admired in the New York "Tribune" the qualities in that great newspaper which the occasional defect of them in its founder could not neutralize, and the characterization of Horace Greeley himself which he has left is a masterpiece of criticism, as generous as it is just. He could not be called a dispassionate observer of men; he was a very impassioned observer; but with his profound and essential belief in the perfectibility of society, he had the correlative wish to be fair to its imperfect particles. It might be said of him, as Heine said of himself, that he loved his enemies, but not until they were dead; yet he was never, even in their lifetimes, without a tenderness for his enemies, or for what was quaint, for what was grotesque in them, for what was human; they appealed to his kindness, if only through his rich sense of humor. If he was unable at the same time to spare them, it was because his conscience, erring or unerring, forbade him to spare them.

A closer knowledge of him than the knowledge his biographer has shared with all, began for me with our personal acquaintance in the first year of "The Nation," when he had already achieved a high place in New York journalism. He had then definitely relinquished the law, and had been for some years a writer of leaders in the "New York Times," where I came upon his traces

when I also aspired to write for the "Times." I believe he had not quite ceased to write there when I began to offer literary papers to him as the editor of "The Nation." He was one of several editors to whom I was then offering such papers, and one day he asked me what my aggregate gains from them came to; then he struck an average in his proposal for my entire literary output, and the next day I came down to the office of the "Nation," where every day for three months after I wrote at a desk in his room, and in his constant companionship. This was one of the most charming passages of a life which I sometimes think has been unduly favored in that way, for we were not so far apart in age that we could not meet on the common ground of young manhood, and we were of a like temperament in the willingness to laugh and make laugh. The world was not so serious then but we could find something amusing in each day's events, and we shared our pleasure in these as we went over the morning's papers respectively, and came on the suggestions for our day's work.

Often before I had found mine his back was turned, and he was busy with the weightier topic which had engaged him before I had settled upon the social or psychological interest which I thought I could turn to account. His journalistic instinct was pretty promptly shown in estimating my powers, such as they were, and in presently appointing their use in a special department to which they were confined as long as I was connected with "The Nation." If something peculiarly fit for it struck us, we talked it over together, and he did not mind turning away from his own manuscript, and listening to what I had written, if the subject had offered any chance for fun. Then his laugh, his Irish laugh, hailed my luck with it, or his honest English mis-giving expressed itself in a criticism which I had to own just. At the end of our day, we sometimes walked up-town together, talking through the roar of the Broadway omnibuses of the many things which interest men in their earlier thirties and their later twenties, and when we parted I always carried with me a heightened impulse and a freshened incentive for the work of the morrow.

I give my experience of him, which is none the less a kindly memory, because I know that it was different in effect from the experience of some others. When, in March, I went to take up

the literary life in Boston, which in one form or other kept me there for twenty-five years, I began to get my genial comrade of the mornings' talk, the mornings' work, more in perspective, and to see him, as the admirable men about me saw him, for the national force into which he was developing. "The Nation" had been founded, in a sort, as the especial organ of the freedmen, if that is not stating it too loosely; but it soon outgrew that limit and became the transcendent influence for honest politics, which it continued until its distinctive individuality was lost by its devolution into the weekly edition of "The Evening Post." But for at least ten years it was the exponent of those who wished our political life to throw off its unprincipled boyishness, and assume the responsibilities and ideals of maturity. It made for dignity as well as purity, and in the dismal reconstruction darkness for something like enlightened patience and circumspection. It is no secret that it hurt and disappointed many of its friends, and it hurt some whom it did not disappoint. It can now do no harm to say that Lowell sometimes winced under "The Nation's" criticisms of his literature, while he held steadfastly to its politics. He and the friends who were next him did justice to what they believed the immense and exceptional service which "The Nation" rendered in maintaining the principles of good government and of public morals in general. They believed that the editor did more to influence public opinion and to give right direction to it for many years than any other man. He raised, they believed, the general level of editorial writing throughout the United States; but I myself heard him do justice to services of others in this cause, specifically to those of Mr. Whitelaw Reid in refusing all part in the personalities which had tended to puerilize New York journalism before his time. But these strong and pure friends of his maintained that in the combination of intellectual power, moral integrity and courage, trained intelligence, knowledge of mankind, devotion to public ends, capacity of clear statement and of well-reasoned argument, he had a solitary preeminence; and that in comparison with these qualities, his defects were inconsiderable.

I do not say that they were mistaken, but only that, from my own knowledge of our journalism, I had found the qualities for which he was unquestionably distinguished less infrequent than they might have believed. What he undoubtedly did was to

assemble and array these qualities in a make-up, under a generalship of singular ability and initiative, against the opposing influences. There were other good men, in and about Boston, especially some survivors of the old, impassioned anti-slavery times, who accused "The Nation" of faltering in the cause to which it had been, as they conceived, originally dedicated. These were, perhaps, such as had been wounded in their favorite opinions, or preferences, or prejudices, but they were also just and truthful persons in certain cases. Whatever they were, they were united with its believers in confessing the power of the new journal: an English liberal journal, on the American terms, with a strong infusion of Irish wit and fight. Whether we liked it or not, or trusted it or not, we looked eagerly for it every week, and read it, and repeated its sayings with a faith in their importance and finality which still survives in Cambridge. Very likely it survives in the pride and affection of other intellectual centres, and very likely "The Nation" might still be the power of old days if it had continued singly or solely to engage the energies of its founder.

No other publication became so nearly the "organ" of the universities. But the time had come for the editor to take that leading place in New York journalism which only a leading daily newspaper offers the man capable of holding it. "The Evening Post" became Godkin's primary interest, and "The Nation" became his secondary interest. The editorials of the "Post" were reproduced in "The Nation," and most of its literary matter, though I believe it was not quite a mere weekly edition of the "Post," but had some features and properties of its own. Yet, somehow, it slipped more into the background, and, somehow, the "Post" came more into the foreground; one may say this without impeaching its continuing excellence. Oddly enough, however, unless I am misreading history, or mistaking the situation, the editor, with an increasing local force, lost something of his national influence, while he gained international recognition. He dealt as strenuously, as faithfully, as ever with national politics, but in this field he grew more critical and conservative, while in foreign matters he held the advanced position of English Liberalism, beyond which, perhaps, he never passed even in his ideals. At the same time, he became so deeply, so intensely, interested in the questions of



municipal government, or misgovernment, more strictly speaking, that while read and trusted at home and abroad for his views of international affairs, he was perhaps less remembered in connection with our general politics than he had been. It would not do to say that he lost his following in these, but it will do to say, I think, that his struggle with the atrocious, the indecent misgovernment of the metropolis was what chiefly centred people's interest upon him. For a long series of years he cried aloud and spared not; his burning wit, his crushing invective, his biting sarcasm, his amusing irony, his pitiless logic, were all devoted to the extermination of the rascality by nature and the rascals by name who misruled that hapless city, where they indeed afterwards changed their name but not their nature.

He wore himself out in the pursuit of them, but he did not wear them out, at least in their succession, as any one may realize who looks at the insolent neglect of our squalid streets, or knows the corruption of our police, or hears the tales of open or hidden graft in our administration, or sees the efforts for civic reform baffled on every hand. Reform, here, does not reform; it scarcely arrests; if a gentleman is chosen mayor, honest men seem no better off than before. The story, as concerns Godkin, has its immense pathos. It is an inexpressible pity that so much power for good should apparently go for so little, and that evil should remain where it was before, qualitatively as strong, and quantitatively greater, than it was before the long struggle with it began. But in this fight he became not only a great New York journalist, but distinctively the greatest, since he was more singly devoted to civic affairs than any other great New York journalist ever was.

The people tired of the fight before their champion tired, it came to be said; and when it came to be said, it came to be thought that the new "Evening Post" was always "finding fault," always "scolding." It came to be said, and it came to be thought, that the editor was a pessimist. But nothing, I conceive, could be more fantastically mistaken as a notion of his nature or his character. If pessimism means anything—and to most people who use the word I do not suppose it means anything—it means despair of the prevalence of good through a divine government of the universe, or through the conscious endeavor of humanity for the right. Pessimism, if such a thing

ever really exists, accepts the worst of all possible worlds as final, and cynically ignores what makes for good inside or outside of us, smiling at the illusion of anything different as a soap-bubble Utopia. But this was not the mood of a man who never rested, while his strength lasted, in his struggle with evil. He believed in the existence of incarnate rascality, of devilry positive and active night and day, but he did not the less keep up his sleepless fight with it. At the same time, he ardently trusted, with the whole force of his generous Celtic nature, with the whole weight of his solid Saxon mind, in the possibility of overcoming this rascality, this devilry, and he gave himself, heart and soul, but without alloy of sentimentality, to its extirpation. I do not know, but I think it possible, that he might sometimes have said, after he was obliged by sickness and weakness to lay down his arms, that he had fought a losing fight, but I do not believe he ever thought that, with time enough and health enough, he could not have made it a winning fight. He must have seen some evidences, partial and transient indeed, of success; he had witnessed from time to time the flight of certain rascals, and he could well have hoped for the exile of rascality. He might have laughed in kindly self-derision at the succession of other rascals to the crown of rascality, but some day, far or near, he believed that round and top of sovereignty would roll in the dust.

His attitude towards America came to be misunderstood, through those who confused it with his hatred of American rascality. Because he cried out on this so incessantly, that it was supposed that he did not believe either in our perfection or our perfectibility; but he did believe in the last though not in the first, and no honest man, not a fool, can pretend to believe in our perfection. He was accused of being foreign-born, and he was undeniably so; he was accused of impatriotism, both as to the land of his birth and the land of his adoption; but nothing could be more false. He never ceased to be a true Irishman, in his love of Ireland's right to self-rule, and he never ceased to be a true American in his love of America's ruling by right alone. He abhorred the jingo ideal of our aggrandizement by battle-ship; he held that, before we sought to become a world-power, we were the greatest as well as safest power in the world because of our moral preeminence, our lofty ideals of justice, our devotion to humanity. In the minor matters of our social character, of

the fineness and goodness that too often lurked beneath our unpleasant surfaces, no one has ever made a franker, bolder, truer representation to the English criticism than he has done in several of his admirable letters. He did understand us, he did believe in us, for he knew not only what we were, but what we were capable of becoming.

When the shadow of war threatened us, when the clouds that our rain-makers had beaten up rolled and gathered over us, he wrote certain things in his journal which seemed shockingly out of taste to those readers who like to pretend that a good war is not hideous. He had seen war, and he had not forgotten how it looked, and how it looked he told his readers, so that they could not fail to see with his eyes that war literally meant men with their skulls burst open, their heads shot off, their limbs scattered, their entrails torn out, their unspeakable agony, whether they lived or died; that war was burning towns and trampled fields, with women and children blown to pieces in the blazing streets or houses, or starving amidst the wasted harvests. He set these things down in plain words, with a simple force of truth such as Vereschagin did not surpass in his awful canvases; and no doubt he increased the popular apprehension of his pessimism. But, all the while, his essential optimism forbade him to believe that the worst could come; he could not really imagine that the Americans, if it could in any wise be shunned or escaped, would plunge into that hell. On the very brink of the catastrophe, I met him once, and we talked together, sadly enough as to the fact in the abstract, and as to the probable effect it would have on our national life; but at last he broke away from the dismal forecast, and with a laugh that came from a heart of faith in humanity, in America, he ended our gloomy parley with the words, "Well, there isn't going to be any war!" Within a week one of our cruisers had seized a wretched Spanish ship-captain's trading-vessel in the Gulf, and the newspapers had told how the poor man had cried over the destruction of his little fortune, and of his livelihood; and then there had come news of the first American blood spilt in a quarrel out of which we had refused to find a peaceful issue. The prophet was not a very good prophet, but as a pessimist he was surely not of a rounded perfection.

W. D. HOWELLS.